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ABSTRACT

The observation period traditionally has served as a time of transition between the study of educational theory and the actual practice of teaching. It has been a time for the trainee to observe--unpressured--the teaching process and to note important teacher-learner behavior. Observation in teacher training--as in medical school--is an art; it can only be perfected with practice, and hopefully it will be continued and stressed as a tool for diagnosis or learning behavior. (JB)

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OBSERVATION - A LOSING ART IN TEACHER TRAINING

by E. P. Kulawiec

There is no doubt that changes in curricular design, teaching methods, and school organization are having a real impact on the kind of training students preparing for the teaching profession are receiving in their teacher-training institutions. And, doubtless, this process is both reciprocal and reversible. One need only to examine former models of teacher-training programs to see that changes in this area are not only very real but highly fluid as well. New models cutting across the whole area of requirements and experiences required of novice teachers appear to have acquired more an experimental status than a fixed or even general one. Different models are being tried and tested in different parts of the country while within even a single school community one is apt to find two or more models being practiced concomitantly. Cooper and Sadker (1) describe such practices, among others, as field-centered instruction, early field experiences, microteaching, simulation, and individualization. Perhaps no other aspect of the teacher-training program has been more modified as has been the observation aspect of the student-teaching experience. And this modification may be more in the nature of emphasis and application rather than in substance. One hears often enough these days the impetuous cries of the undergraduate trainee, "We want to begin teaching right away," or "Observation is boring, a waste of time," and "It's far too long. It ought to be reduced," or even "I don't know what to do with my time." A close scrutiny of such and similar remarks made by the student teacher and reinforced even by his critic teacher, tends to reflect either the low state observation

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has fallen into, or the lack of recognition as a method it has acquired or, worse, that its very purpose has been relegated to the status of uselessness. At the same time one can cite practices of cooperating teachers of putting their student teachers to work immediately either as tutors or teacher aids, or even as team teaching associates and, thereby, reducing formal observation either to inconsequence or, worse, eliminating it entirely. This is not to say that these practices, or those like them, are wrong or dangerous, or that observation per se is not taking place within their framework. Far from it. Since teaching has become viewed more and more as a process of interaction and communication between the teacher and the learner, it seems reasonable and even desirable to expect this insistent push to step right into the thick of things, to begin teaching or interacting from the start. To do is to learn one can argue and, rightfully so. However, upon closer examination, it seems equally reasonable to expect some harm or danger in this process of "throwing" the student teacher so quickly or too hastily into this interacting role unless certain assurances, certain precautions are emphasized and, thereby, safeguarded.

Hitherto, the observation period of student teaching was designed to allow the student teacher adequate time to observe the activities going on in the classroom, the teacher's strategies, the learner's behavior, and the learning process being enacted. By design, widely and generally accepted and practiced in teacher-training programs, the observation period served to ease the teacher trainee into the real and hectic role of teaching at a gradual pace. It was, and still is for that matter, a period wherein the trainee, at ease and unpressured, is able to view the teaching process with all its myriad activities and requirements with some eye to seeing and relating these against a background of recently learned theories and models. Murphy (2) emphasized this period as:

> . . .a necessary buffer zone between the study of educational theory and actual teaching. In order to make proper and full use of his period of watching in the classroom, the prospective teacher must be appraised of what the crucial aspects of teaching a lesson are, so that he will know what to focus his attention upon.

While the general structure of the teacher-training program has remained basically unchanged over the past years, i.e., culminating in an experience involving observation and teaching, those changes which have occurred, like pre-teaching laboratory experiences, individualized instruction, tutoring, team-teaching participation, teacher aiding, and the like, have or allow for the possibility of accommodating teacher trainees to teaching perhaps too soon and without adequately emphasizing the real value of observation. Present field experience in student teaching would tend to substantiate this notion. Teacher trainees through pre-teaching field experiences, through independent practice or through related course application run the serious risk of seeing the interaction or communication aspect of teaching as the only aspect with observation being tacked on either cursorily or casually or without equal or due emphasis. Hence, when the actual student-teaching experience is finally realized, the real skill of observing becomes a superfluous appendage, a boring exercise or, worse, an unnecessary activity. And herein lies the real danger, both to the teacher trainee who will not acquire the honest appreciation for critical observation, and to the learner who will be looked upon solely as an important member in a communicating triad or the necessary participant in an interacting bond.

The teaching profession has undoubtedly borrowed a page from medicine in insisting, like the medical intern, that teacher trainees teach under the watchful and practiced eyes of a critic teacher for a designated period of

time, and thus insuring that theory and practice are broached effectively, if not correctly. At the same time, what becomes a life-long, a profession-long diagnostic tool in the hands of the medical doctor through emphasis, practice, and drill, appears to fizzle out in the young teacher almost at the start of a career and that through lack of insistence, perhaps even negligence, or simply an inability to accept what ought to be the most important aspect in teaching--being able to observe and diagnose learning behavior with the discerning and analytical eye of a scientist. As the medical intern does not come into his profession automatically armed with the skill or aptitude for observing, neither is it correct to assume that the student teacher enters his own profession so armed. Clearly, observation is a behavior which is learned. And it is learned upon being practiced, worked on, tried, emphasized, encouraged, and reinforced. In the case of the medical intern this amounts to endless rounds of the hospital wards under the experienced and often severe counsel of the resident or senior physician. In the case of the student teacher, it is a matter of the teacher-training program, through its courses, its personnel, and its field experience. And in either case, observation is raised to the level of art only through repeated and insistent practice. While it is not the intent here to draw an analogy between the doctor and the teacher, an analogy long recognized by the teaching profession, it must be said in all honesty that while both professions have undergone changes in their professional services and/or orientations, medicine has in no way diminished the emphasis it places on observation, in kind or in worth. In teaching, a case may be made to the contrary if such comments of student teachers as cited earlier are to be understood at face value. It follows, then, that all those involved in the teacher-training programs must accept the onus of re-directing emphasis on the observation aspect of not only student teaching, but of teaching in

general. Observation must become so thorough as to appear scientific. It appears the only sensible way to diagnose learning behaviors effectively and for whatever the reason. And the reasons for this are all too clear. Learning itself is becoming more and more independently oriented. Learning machines are entering more and more into the ordinary make-up of the learning environment. The number of direct contact hours between the teacher and the learner is diminishing as self-study or -learning increases. And the understanding of learning as a psychological process is becoming more and better understood. Against such a background then, the teacher must really and clearly become a skillful observer so that decisions regarding the learner and the learning process are based on thorough understanding of available facts. And it is only by skillful observation that facts become available. While the schema for student-teaching observation of Murphy (2), Tanruther (3), Shumsky (4), and Harris and Bessant (5), to cite a few examples, are noteworthy in emphasizing in detail lesson objectives, subject matter, and teaching techniques and strategies, it seems that in the light of present developments in learning-teaching alternatives in the public school, there is the risk that observation in that critical and scientific sense will receive more and more only casual reference in deference to the mechanics of actual teaching. Tanruther (3) states that observation requires critical analysis. This clearly should be the emphasis placed on observation in teacher preparation programs. The diagnosis of learning behavior is the key to successful treatment of learning problems. Who, if not the teacher, should develop a reverence for and skill in its practice. And while science has added immensely to our knowledge of the learner and the learning process in recent years, there seems to exist an inverse relationship toward the regard and practice of observation in teaching. It behooves all of us, therefore, involved in teacher-training to emphasize repeatedly the importance of

observation in teaching at every step and that to develop this skill of critical analysis requires painstaking, continuous and repeated practice, to insure that it becomes an automatic and natural teacher behavior. And only by insisting on its importance and relevance and absolute need throughout the entire teacher-training program can it be hoped to raise observation to its rightful level--that of an art.

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